

Transcription of Newell Quinton Interview

Interviewer: Jan Robinson

Interviewee: Newell Quinton

Short Summary: Newell Quinton, interviewed by Jan Robinson on July 12th, 2005, tells us about his education in the Rosenwald School, the colored elementary school in San Domingo, and his education at Salisbury High School. He details how his community, which consisted of teachers, parents, and the church, shaped his development and discusses the differences between his experiences and the experiences of the current youth.

Robinson: I'm talking today to Newell Quinton from San Domingo. Mr. Quinton, how long has your family been in San Domingo?

Quinton: All of my life. We were born and raised in San Domingo. My parents originate here in San Domingo. I was born here in 1944.

Robinson: What can you tell me about the history of the Rosenwald School here in San Domingo?

Quinton: We recently learned that the old school learning community was the Rosenwald School. At the time that we were students or young children born in San Domingo, unfortunately we never learned of Rosenwald. My wife and I recently learned of the Rosenwald School Initiative truly by accident. Trying to find ways to restore or to preserve the old school learning community, and a friend of ours working on a summer project in Berlin told us about the Rosenwald Project, and then we went to the internet and sure enough found that our school was also listed in the archives at this University. From there, we did just a slight bit of research to learn more about the Rosenwald Initiative and Booker T. Washington and their relationship, only to know that we were beneficiaries of such a great endeavor.

Robinson: You're a graduate of that school?

Quinton: Yes. Everyone who lived in San Domingo at the time, that is all the black children in San Domingo and the surrounding communities, attended the Rosenwald School. At that time it was referred to as the Sharptown Colored Elementary School, as we call it just old school. But we all walked to school, so if you were living anywhere near around and expected to go to school, then there was never a thought that you knew you would be attending that school here in the center of San Domingo.

Robinson: So you were at that school from approximately what year to what year?

Quinton: I'm sure we started school at age 6. I attended the school until we were able to go to high school, which would've been from 1950-57. I started high school at grade 7. In those years, children went here 6 years. My older siblings tell me that at one point, children went here until 7th grade. But I started 7th grade at the then Salisbury High School, which was a new school built on West Salisbury off of Lake Street, not the original Salisbury High School, but the new school down off of Jersey Road.

Robinson: Could you describe a typical day at the school?

Quinton: I guess a typical day for us starts at home, when we either started off with our chores, those things we did in the morning. We simply walked to school as a group of kids. We knew everyone in the community, being a small community, and someone was somewhat related to quite a few people. So our day would start doing whatever we were told to do, assigned for us to do around the home. Making sure that we walked to school and got there on time or slightly ahead of time. At school, it really a joyous event because we were able to see all our friends and associates, not only here in San Domingo, but those children who would come from Mardela, [inaudible], or the surrounding communities, which is really hard to imagine, but any child in close proximity attended school here so we had lots of friends who came to the old school. So that day, we started doing our classwork, and we always looked forward to recess. Recess first was great fun, because we were very proud of playing softball. We had a very large playground in the school, so addition to trying to do well in class, we were also very competitive on the playground. The boys typically played softball, the girls would play volleyball, maybe a spin on the merry go round. From recess to recess, choosing teams and integration of a softball game.

Robinson: Were all your teachers African American.

Quinton: Yes. In those days, the school system was completely separate. The only people that I recall ever seeing in school who were not black, were the administrators, who would come to the school on occasion I guess to inspect the school or to review the education system. But all the students and all the teachers were African American. Teachers lived in the community, and it was a great fortune to have an automobile. I really don't recall many of them having vehicles. I recall our principal living here in the community and actually walking to school with a family just like we did. So it was really a involved the [inaudible] community. We did one whole day like any other day. We knew that it was time to go to school, time to go home, and one thing followed another. You either went home to do chores and then engaged in some type of get together at someone's home to play some activity or just have fun.

Robinson: Did you find that there were enough books and supplies and things to go around or did you feel like you were shorted out?

Quinton: I think truthfully during grade school we never really thought about it. Things went well in terms of education. I guess as you reflect on the education experience and those things it's hard to assess what was good or bad or indifferent. Let me answer from two perspectives. As a student, we felt it was great to go to school. We had probably some of the best teachers that we had because there was a sincere sense of caring about us, so we were certainly well educated. Education probably went well beyond what was in the textbooks. For the most part we all had a textbook. If you ask me now, was it the most current book at the time, I have no idea. Probably wasn't. But at that time it didn't matter because we felt we were getting educated, and we knew our teachers cared about us. That same sense of caring was transferred to our families, as well as to our church. So we had a great support system, including our teachers.

Only after you start reflecting back on our education experience and comparing it to other systems, you realize maybe well we didn't use the same textbooks or maybe we didn't have the same material. But at the time when it was occurring, a 10 year old, a 6 year old, 8 year old, 9 year old person, you really don't have that on your mind. What's on your mind is how to do those things that your teacher is asking you to do. Certainly the teachers and the parents may have known there was a difference, but as a student, at 6,7,8 years old, that's not on your mind. What's on your mind was how to please your teacher or do what you were told to do, and we made that our main focus.

If I had to reflect on education here in San Domingo, or even Salisbury, our whole focus at the time for our teachers was being prepared. Be the best prepared that we could possibly be, and that was our goal. So we owe a great deal of gratitude to our teachers at the time who knew what we were facing later in years that we had no idea of. So their whole focus was to make sure that we prepared to compete. I learned that more in high school than I did here in San Domingo going through grade school. My high school teachers, that was their focus, many of them kept that on our minds all the time, to be very competent at whatever we chose to do, and to make sure that we were as well prepared for any other high school graduate in the state.

Robinson: So your teachers and your parents had very high expectations of you?

Quinton: Absolutely. I think our teachers in many ways looked at our success or failure as their own success or failure. So they were committed to ensuring sure we were prepared, and went to great odds involved in the family, the student, and themselves to do the very best so that we would be on par with other students. I know I've heard many, many times in high school and can reflect very freshly now discussions with my English teacher, Math teacher, History teacher, Latin teacher, English teacher, about what was required when and if we ever got to college, or

when and if we ever got to sit in the same classroom with the boys and girls from the white high school or the big city high school. We were compared to the white schools as much as we were compared to the city schools. So you had 2 yard sticks to gauge how well you were doing by. One, we certainly wanted to do as well as anybody in Wi (Wicomico) High. We always compared Salisbury High to Wi High, gee are you good enough to do that. That was a major hurdle. Many of our teachers either went to Bowie State College, or Maryland State, or Morgan State at the time, [inaudible] universities in the state school system, but at the time most of our teachers graduated from those historically black colleges, so their focus at that time was to make sure that we would be successful if we were given the opportunity to go to those same schools. Then if going to those same schools, there was a question if we were graduates from Salisbury High School, we would be on the competitive edge of those students who attended those high schools in the big city of Baltimore. One yard stick certainly was Baltimore City College that had a premier high school at the time, and lo and behold, those of us fortunate enough to go to college ended up in places like Morgan State and Coppin in classes with those students from Baltimore City College. We were prepared to agree that I think we did well. [Laughs].

Robinson: So in your opinion, the black school system at the time did its very best for you?

Quinton: Yes without a doubt. Again it's easier now to reflect on our [inaudible] much more now than it was when we were experiencing it. Hindsight is 20/20, and without a doubt, I can look back on that experience and know that our teachers prepared us well, and did more than what was necessary to ensure that we learned the material and that we knew what was going to be demanded of us in a world that was still segregated. We were trained in the old stigma that you had to be better than anyone else in order to succeed. Sure enough, preparing us to deal with that ensured a lot for our success. You just kept it in the back of your mind that if you were going to be successful, then you had to be better than anyone else. So their whole focus was to make sure that we were trained to the degree that you could succeed through any obstacle in front of you.

Robinson: You said that church is very important in this community. Did that carry into the school in any way?

Quinton: I would say yes. For myself, I think it's probably more effort to look in an environment, although there was a physical separation, but when you see the same people, who have an influence on your life Monday through Friday, and also Saturday and Sunday, then church for us was the location we went to on Sunday. Although we went there to worship, but our behavior conduct applied to us Monday through Friday, as it was on Sunday. My teacher in elementary school, my principal, every morning, I remember when I was in 5th and 6th grade, he would start off school with a hymn. I still remember the hymn was "I come to the garden alone" while the [inaudible] was still on the roses. It was that structure that was present in the school

system just like it was in church. There was no question that we had the greatest respect for our teachers and our teachers have their own families, and our teachers were also present with us at church. So it may have been a different location, but the same moral standards and structure was always there.

Robinson: How was the school an integral part of the community? What type of community activities happened in the school?

Quinton: I would say that the total community responded to anything happening at the school. If there was an assembly, then everyone in the community was at the school. It wasn't a question of "Should you go?", "Who was going?", it was "This is the event of the day", and everyone in the community would be at the school whether it was a play, a discussion, it was just that school was 100 percent part of the community, and it was supported to that degree. If the teachers needed something, I think for the most part the teachers turned to the parents and made it known. The parents in the community did their very best to ensure that the teachers got whatever they needed. I really don't know how that occurred, because I'm always amazed in thinking of how things worked, and to me as a young boy I never heard of a problem. Things worked reasonably well, and I was always amazed at the frequency in which teachers were talking to the parents, or the parents were talking to the teachers. During that time, my father took a very active role in education and so quite often, we would have a teacher or the principal at the house talking about some issue. Thank goodness it wasn't about something we had done [chuckles], it was about an issue involving school, and where the community and school was headed. It was a joint effort. I guess that would be a suitable word. I can't say there was a separation as much as a mutual support. Throughout my whole life I think everyone in the community that I learned to know and respect certainly held education in the very high esteem.

Robinson: Are there any other closing comments you'd like to make about the school and the San Domingo community, growing up here?

Quinton: I think it's very, very important that we try to restore this school as an institutional symbol of what it meant to [inaudible]. I think those values that were taught to us are worthwhile and we should continue and instill them in today's generations because I don't think those relationships exist. The years go by and looking back I say "Geez what went wrong?". I know we're doing things differently but in comparison I guess when I think about my experience either going here in Sharptown Colored Elementary School or Salisbury High School, and knowing the concern and care of our teachers and their relationship with our parents in developing us for life, then I think even in a segregated society, we were better prepared than the kids are today.

As I talk to kids today, I am just amazed at the degree to which they're not prepared to deal with some issues that they have everyday, and I have to wonder what school system was better. Sort

of fight and talk to young people today and think about the degree to which they are not prepared to move forward in their life. I have to think that we were much better prepared. At least I feel that way I could be totally wrong, but at least that's my feeling in knowing the work that the teachers did, their integration with their family, and the church, and the community, and being prepared to deal with their future, that whose mindset produced a better product than what appears to be occurring today. Maybe it's a generational thing, maybe it's all the other aspects and opportunities that's available to people today that make them seem to not be focused. But to me, we seemed to be focused on being prepared to succeed. So maybe that's the difference. It's very hard to compare over a span of 40 years, but as an analyst, that's what I would do is to find the reasons why one system works and why that one works better. I mean both work, it's not a question of whether both systems work but you have to ask yourself which system produces the best results. Or which system are the people most prepared to move forward in. That raises some questions and concerns I think we ought to look at.

Robinson: Thank you very much. This has been Newell Quinton from San Domingo, telling us about his education in the Rosenwald School, the colored elementary school in San Domingo, and something about his education at Salisbury High School, and how it prepared him for the rest of his life.